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Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in an EFL life science course

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Abstract

Content-based EFL courses are thought to interest students which will then activate intrinsic motivation for language learning. However, not all subjects innately appeal to students, particularly Life Science. A film version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was watched in class in order to teach a wide range of biological concepts. In order to determine whether or not the film was well received, students answered surveys followed by semi-structured interviews of exceptional and unexceptional students. The film was found to hold and indeed pique interest, for both exceptional and unexceptional students, more effectively than a text or power point presentation could. It seemed unexceptional students found the film stimulating as it did not feel like a forced academic exercise.

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1 Introduction

Content-based (CB) courses are an accepted method for teaching EFL students in a learning environment that is more theme oriented than the usual EFL classroom (Short, 1993, and Davies, 2003,) where the subject matter interests and thus motivates the students (Chamot & O'Mally, 1994). CB courses are common in Japan and were first taught in the Hokusei Jr College English Department about 20 years ago (Allison, 1995, and Andrade, 2014) with the CB Life Science course now in its 19th year (Maune, 1997).

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Motivating students is what CB courses should do as well as what teaching should do (Ames & Archer, 1988; Bandura & Schunk, 1981), but in the case of life science, almost all of the students are uninterested in science which is a disadvantageous starting position (Maune, 2013). With that in mind, the most famous tragedy on love, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, was used in an attempt to teach biological concepts through drama. In this case students viewed the Academy award winning motion picture version of *Romeo and Juliet* by Zeffirelli (Brabourne, & Havelock-Allen, 1968) along with part of Luhrmann's version of *Romeo and Juliet* (Brabourne & Havelock-Allen, 1968, and Luhrmann & Martinellis, 1996). Movies have been shown to be effective for motivating students in EFL classrooms (Ryan & Francais, 1998, and Ismaili, 2013), but using a movie of a Shakespearean tragedy to teach biological concepts in an EFL CB course might be novel.

2 In the classroom

2.1 Course description

During the second semester of the CB course Life Science, students watched all off the Zeffirelli movie version and the party and balcony scenes of Luhrmann's version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Brabourne & Havelock-Allen, 1968, and Luhrmann & Martinellis, 1996). The first viewing of the Zeffirelli film proceeded with few comments from the teacher. The second viewing consisted of analyzing the action of select scenes in more detail. When the dialogue was examined more closely, the text from OpenSourceShakespeare, the 1864 Globe edition of the complete works, was used (Shakespeare, 2006). Some dialogue omitted from the movie could be included to better illustrate desired points. A few examples of concepts covered include; aggression and kin selection in Act I, Scenes 1 & 5 and Act III, Scene 1 – particularly line 680 and 705, the biochemistry and stages of love (Fisher, 2004) and mating strategy or sexual conflict and parental investment from both movies in Act I, Scenes 4 and 5, and Act II Scene 2, and a Darwinian perspective on art discussing bower birds and the words Geoffrey Miller assigns to the feathered artists (Miller, 2001) then, as Shakespeare could not, giving the final words to Mercutio (Act II, Scene 4, lines 1241-1247) which are ripe with meaning:

Why, is not this better now than groaning for love?
 now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art
 thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature:
 for this driveling love is like a great natural,
 that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole.

2.2 Feedback

After finishing that section of the course, students were surveyed (N=15) about whether or not they thought using the movie was worthwhile, was more engaging than standard texts and power points, and should the movie be used in the next year's class. The results were almost 100% positive; about 4.8 for all three questions on a five point likert scale. The results were not at all surprising as the discussions during class time while going over biological explanations of various scenes had noticeably more participation than during other sections of the course with heightened student interest quite visible. Following the surveys, semi-structured interviews of two exceptional or

intrinsically motivated and two unexceptional or not intrinsically motivated students were done. A total of three teachers, who taught all of the students in one or more different courses, assigned each student to one of three categories; 1-exceptional (highly motivated), 2-somewhat exceptional, and 3-not exceptional (not highly motivated). Only students that were assigned unanimously to either group 1 or 3 were considered for the interview. Both groups of students again found the movie more engaging than other standard teaching materials. It seemed the unexceptional students were engaged as the movie did not feel like a forced academic exercise, and they found the film stimulating as it did not feel like a forced academic exercise. Rather, it felt like something fun and entertaining that would not be out place doing at home with no focus on biology or language learning. Students from both groups also were interested in the movie due to the universal fame of Shakespeare as a world art icon (Holland, 2014., and “Shakespeare”, 2014), and also would have heightened focus on anything dealing with any aspect of love.

3 Conclusion

It should not be surprising that a multimillion dollar academy award winning production of *Romeo and Juliet* would prove more adept at holding students' interests than a textbook or a power point presentation. Movies are crafted in order to entertain and hold our interest. As for Shakespeare, his works had gone viral well before that term existed and has perhaps proven to be the most adept human ever at engaging and stimulating thought or even of pushing the boundaries of human awareness (Bloom, 1998). Shakespeare had to create believable characters that illustrate human behavior and drama or he would not have been so popular during his time or now throughout the world; thus, even a medieval drama like *Romeo and Juliet* is full of biological and social relevance that holds people's interest today as well they did more than 400 years ago.

Students were well satisfied using *Romeo and Juliet* in Life Science class and class participation was improved which meets goals for an improved learning environment (Ames & Archer, 1988), and one step in the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (Chamot & O'Mally, 1994). However, the goal of the class is to teach EFL skills, in this case in a CB format, as well as biological concepts. Therefore, an evaluation on language skills or on understanding and retention of the various biological concepts taught would be needed. This would require a control group learning the same concepts without using the movie. However, this is currently problematic as there is only one section of Life Science, but if two sections are ever needed, then such a study would be feasible. Another possible way to test the movie's efficacy in the EFL context would be to omit the movie one year and compare test results, but this would seem to be unfair to that class as use of the movie was rated very highly.

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